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Are Ofsted's school inspections leaving parents at the periphery?

December 18, 2015 10.04am GMT

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[Guidelines](#) for Ofsted inspectors brought in this September mean that school inspectors are no longer judging schools and [school leaders](#) on how their engagement with parents impacts on the achievements of older children.

Now Ofsted merely insists that schools receive parental views, report to parents on progress, and “guide” parents on how to support – but crucially not engage with – their children’s learning. I regret this step on Ofsted’s part.

As an example, schools could tell parents what children are doing in school, and suggest that parents help children with homework, or discuss what they have learned that day. But schools wishing to be judged outstanding by Ofsted will no longer have to prove that their work with parents is “highly successful” and “to the benefit of pupils, including those who find working with the school difficult”, as used to be the case.

I believe that “engaging” with young people’s learning requires more from parents than “supporting” does. Engaging [is defined](#) as occupying the attention or effort of someone, while supporting is [defined as](#) “to be a foundation for”. Parental support for the learning of young people is very important, but parental engagement takes that support a step further.

The sting is the phrase “highly successful”: there is no longer any imperative to judge how, or if, engagement by schools with parents is of benefit to pupils.

Not consistent throughout childhood

In a [handbook](#) published in January 2015, and in force since September, Ofsted does not present a cohesive inspection regime throughout the school system. In the section about early years education, it shows an understanding of the [research](#) around the value of parental engagement. One section says:

Early Years Inspectors will ... [inspect] how well staff work with parents, engage them in their children’s learning and keep them informed.

With these words, Ofsted should be praised for continuing to highlight the results of so many [years of research](#), and highlighting the importance of parental engagement with children’s learning. But similar phrases, which were part of the [previous criteria](#) on which schools were judged overall by Ofsted, have disappeared for older children.

Ofsted's message seems to be that parental engagement is seen to be a good thing for young children, but once they move up to "big school", this engagement, which has been shown also [to be beneficial to teenagers](#), is no longer an integral part of the inspection regime.

Priorities could shift elsewhere

It is difficult to say how schools will react to these changes. I suspect that schools which were already doing work with parents worthy of the previous rating of "outstanding" will continue to do so, for the simple reason that they've seen how effective it can be. What worries me is the effect on those schools not currently rated outstanding by Ofsted.

Parents need to be engaged in their children's learning. Areipa.lt/www.shutterstock.com

Schools aiming for an outstanding Ofsted report can now quite legitimately concentrate on giving and receiving information from parents, and ignore the work of increasing parents' engagement with their children's learning. Such work may be more challenging, but in the long run, research has shown it to be more [effective](#) at raising achievement.

When asked to respond to The Conversation on the change in wording, a spokesperson for Ofsted said:

We are clear that parents have a crucial role to play in their child's education. That is why we encourage them to make their views known on Parent View, through which they can offer feedback about their child's school. When they go into schools, inspectors check how well they engage parents in their children's learning and help them understand how well they are doing.

Academic researchers [remain convinced](#) of the value of parental engagement with children's learning. The Welsh government has gone in the opposite direction to Ofsted, with the [publication of its toolkit](#) for Engagement with Families and Communities. And Estyn, the inspection regime for Welsh schools, [lists parents](#) as first among the "strategic partners" with whom schools must work to raise standards and increase well-being.

In spite of more than 25 years of research showing the value of parental engagement, Ofsted seems to be moving away from making sure it is of benefit to children.